

# **Chinese Christians, Business Enterprise, and the State in Malaysia**

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, a number of successful Malaysian Chinese businessmen, have made regular public declaration of their Christian faith. The paper looks at who these Chinese Christian businessmen are, their businesses, and their relationship with the Christian community and the larger Chinese society. The paper explains that a visible and influential Chinese Christian business group emerged since 1971 because of expanding state role in the economy, Islamic resurgence, and the influence of two international movements: global Christianity and ‘diaspora’ Chinese amidst a rising China.

**Key words:** Chinese, Christianity, the Malaysian state, international Christianity, China

## **Introduction**

A striking phenomenon in Malaysia recently is the public proclamation of their Christian faith by some successful Malaysian Chinese (hereafter “Chinese”) businessmen. Coming largely from Protestant evangelical churches, these Christian businessmen, many with thriving enterprises, are influential within the Malaysian corporate and public sectors. The increasing visibility of this group provides an opportunity to explore the relationship between Chinese business in Malaysia and the Christian faith. Academic interest so far has been on the link between Chinese business and Confucianism (Yao, 2002). The recent rise of East Asia certainly encouraged those who contend that Confucianist values helped transform the region. This is part of a broader discussion on whether culture and religion are important in creating an entrepreneurial spirit among Chinese overseas. Reference is frequently made to Max Weber’s thesis on the influence of Protestant ethics in the rise of capitalism in the West (Hudson, 1988;

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Cheung and Jie, 2006). Tu (1996), however, noted that the debate on Confucianism and the rise of East Asian business is far from being settled (Tu, 1996). Now, adding to the Confucianist-business discussion is this new phenomenon of Christian business groups.

Four issues are dealt with here. First, who are these Chinese Christian businessmen? Is the business they are involved in distinctive? Second, what is the relationship of this group with the Christian community? Specifically, why have these businessmen identified themselves openly as Christians. Third, is the emergence of a Chinese Christian business group an outcome of economic and political policies pursued by the state particularly since 1971 of an affirmative action that disadvantaged the Chinese? And finally, to what extent does this growing visibility of a Chinese Christian group reflects changes within the broader Chinese society.

These questions may help explain the meaning of the faith among Chinese Christian businessmen with many having embraced the religion or experienced renewal as they build their enterprises. So it may be more than just the Weberian suggestion that religion served to encourage acquisitive values and rational business practices. The Chinese businessmen in this study express through their business their newly discovered religious duty and stewardship. Furthermore, Christianity offers them a new identity that also enables business networking in the manner Confucianism offers to other Chinese businessmen. These questions are set within the context of what is happening around Malaysia. There is a resurgence of religiosity among the different communities in the country, particularly Islam. Within the Christian community there is the increasing influence of the Christian charismatic movement, including the internationally-connected 'prosperity gospel'. Chinese Christian businessmen in Malaysia are therefore encountering two international movements: global Christianity and 'diaspora' Chinese at a time of a rising China.

## Literature Review

Of relevance to this study is an article by Tan Jin Huat on the Pentecostals and Charismatics in Malaysia and Singapore where he points to the rise of evangelical Christians in the two decades since 1960s but does not relate it to business (Tan, 2005). Koning and Dahles carried out a useful empirical study on the religious conviction of ethnic Chinese managers in Malaysia and Indonesia (Koning and Dahles, 2009; Dahles, 2007). The study took the research of Raymond Lee and Susan further beyond explaining the experiential expression of the charismatic Christian movement of the 1980s (Ackerman and Lee, 1988). Koning and Dahles wanted to test the hypothesis that managers, in a climate of competition for scarce resources, are also going for spiritual satisfaction as much as profitability. But Koning and Dahles were concerned with managers and less on businessmen who were owners although Dahles in a subsequent paper referred to owners of small businesses (Dahles, 2007).

On church-state relations, for the colonial period there is Andrew Porter's *Religion versus Empire* and for the post-independence and the nation-building period there is *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict* edited by Julius Bautista and Francis Khok Gee Lim

(Porter, 2009). The edited book of Bautista and Lim has, as its main theme, the relations of Christianity with the state particularly as to how the state has either hindered or facilitated the propagation, regulation or maintenance of the Christian faith. Within the conflict-complicity paradigm of church-state relations are several positions that are still evolving and negotiated. Adding to the complexities is the position of ethnic minorities in Church-state relations (Keyes *et al.*, 1994; Lim, 2012). This is certainly the case for Christians and the Chinese in Malaysia. How are Christians and the Chinese responding to a transition from colonial rule and the immediate post-independence years during which the state maintained a distance from religious and economic affairs to one where there is now greater government presence in the two areas. For Chinese Christian businessmen, there is the challenge of asserting a double identity, that of a Christian and a Chinese businessman. These have to be negotiated within a context and challenge of globalization (Lipartito, 2007).

### **Selected Prominent Christian Businessmen and Their Background**

This study identifies twelve prominent Chinese Christian businessmen to provide insight into the Chinese Christian business group. The selection of these twelve was to allow a manageable discussion. The individuals are established businessmen and are recognized as leaders by the community. They are also well-known within the Christian as well as Chinese community. The views they expressed about their faith and their social concern are published and shared with members of the Chinese Christian business group. These twelve were identified through documentary sources and from those knowledgeable about Christianity and business in Malaysia. To arrive at the twelve a survey was made of the lists of the richest men in Malaysia of the past five years such as were found in financial publications. These included the *Edge*, *Forbes* and *Malaysian Business*. A search was also made of Christian magazines such as *Christianity Malaysia* and NECF newsletters where Christian leaders are featured.

Interviews were held with Christian leaders to verify that the twelve in the list were recognized as leading Chinese Christian businessmen. Many of those interviewed were close to the twelve or had worked for them. Among those interviewed were: Philip Koh, senior lawyer, once legal advisor to Tong Kooi Ong; Dr. Ng Kam Wing, Director Kairos Research Centre, a Christian think tank; Reverend Tan Jin Huat, Seminari Teoloji Malaysia; Jeffrey Cheah, a Christian and business consultant; and Michael Moey, a educationist and church leader. In the exercise, relevant details such as business careers, religious influence and religious and social roles were compiled. These are found in Table 1.

Five of the twelve are listed in *Forbes* and *Malaysian Business*. They are Tiong Hew King, Lee Oi Hian, Khoo Kay Peng, Francis Yeoh and Tony Tiah. Tiong is a Fuzhou Methodist from Sarawak, who with US\$1.2 billion was ranked as the 10<sup>th</sup> richest man in Malaysia by *Forbes* in 2012 (Rimbunan, 2014). He has diversified interests such as in timber and control of the region's Chinese media. Lee Oi Hian is ranked 11<sup>th</sup> with an estimated wealth of \$1.1 billion (Hanim, 2012). Khoo ranked 39<sup>th</sup> richest in Malaysia in *Forbes* 2012 once owned a bank but

today is better known for his hotels, industries, and chain of retail shops (Leong and Chin, 2013). Another Christian businessman, Francis Yeoh who together with his father Yeoh Tiong Lay (who gave his name to the company YTL Corporation), and two brothers, are also among those in the *Forbes* list (Gunasegaran, 2014). Tony Tiah Thee Kian is in the *Malayan Business* list of wealthy businessmen (TA Enterprise, 2012).

The others are Chan Ah Chye, Peter Ng, Tan Koon Swan, George Ting, Tong Kooi Ong, David Wong, and Michael Yam. Although not listed in *Forbes* or *Malaysian Business*, these Christian businessmen are nevertheless among the most successful in the different sectors they are in according to volume or capitalization of business. Chan and Yam are in property development. Tong was previously in finance and property, owning PhileoAllied Bank and Phileo Property, but has since moved to media while retaining his property interest. In media he once held controlling shares in widely-circulated *The Sun Daily* but now concentrates on the respected *Edge Daily* and *Edge Weekly* (Jayasankaran, 2008). Ting is well known in the food business (Chan, 2013). He once held the Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut franchises but has since focused on Shakey's Pizza and Domino Pizza. These are two food chains with country-wide outlets.

Table 1. Malaysian Chinese Christian Businessmen: Basic Profiles

No.	Name	Educational background	Brought up as Christians or converted	Church / Christian Organization	Company	Industry
1.	Chan Ah Chye	English-educated	Converted	Sidang Injil Borneo	Kumpulan Europlus Bhd. and Talam Corporation Bhd.	Property development
2.	Khoo Kay Peng	English-educated	Converted	Calvary Church	Malaysian United Industries	Services, manufacturing and trading, heavy investment overseas
3.	Lee Oi Hian	English-educated	Converted but went through Catholic school	Methodist	Kuala Lumpur-Kepong Plantations	Plantations
4.	Ng T.S., Peter	English-educated	Converted	The Navigators	UCSI University (formerly UCSI University College-Sedaya)	Education and related industries
5.	Tan Koon Swan	English-educated	Converted	First Baptist / Calvary Church	Supreme Corporation, Multi-purpose Holding	Trading and property development



No.	Name	Educational background	Brought up as Christians or converted	Church / Christian Organization	Company	Industry
6.	Tiah, Tony	English-educated	Converted	SIB	TA Global Bhd; TA Enterprise	Financial service, stock broking
7.	Ting Yew Tong, George	English-educated	Converted	PJ EFC	Shakey's Pizza	Food and restaurant
8.	Tiong Hew King	English and Chinese-educated	Brought up as Methodist	Methodist Church (evangelical)	Rimbunan Hijau	Media, plantation, investment in China
9.	Tong Kooi Ong	English-educated	Brought up as Methodist	Methodist Church (evangelical)	The Edge, UPP Holdings, Singapore PhileoAllied; Serai Saujana Development Sdn. Bhd.	Media, financial services and property development
10.	Wong, David	English-educated	Converted	The Navigators	Tupperware Brands Malaysia, Asia Pacific	Trading
11.	Yam Kong Choy, Michael	English-educated	Converted	Renewal Lutheran Church	Serai Saujana Development Sdn. Bhd.	Property development
12.	Yeoh Sock Ping, Francis	English-educated	Converted	Full Gospel Assembly	YTL Corporation	Power supplier, heavy overseas investment

Source: Various newspapers, business journals, Christian magazines and interviews

Judging religiosity is not easy. Church membership and recognition by the church community are the basic criteria. All 12 are regular church-going. More than that, they are active participants in Christian business events or church activities. It has been contended that how active Christian businessmen are in Christian-related events can be traced to their experience in embracing their faith. The born-again or spiritual renewal experience explains the commitment in living out their Christian faith in the market-place. Among the twelve, the majority are born-again Christians or those who converted to Christianity late in life (See Table 1). Or that they were Christians when young but had subsequently undergone a spiritual renewal. This fact establishes the point that most in this group were already very successful in business or well on the way to being so.

Khoo Kay Peng and Francis Yeoh were converts when they were adults. The most remarkable is Chan Ah Chye who converted seven years ago at the age of 60 by which time he was head of Talam Corporation (Chan, 2013). Just as dramatic was the conversion of Tan Koon Swan. Tan was head of Multi-purpose Holdings, the Supreme Corporation and several major companies in the 1980s. He was jailed following charges of corporate offences. While

incarcerated he became a Christian and later was active with Khoo Kay Peng in the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship (FGBMF, 2012). Ng was converted when he was associated with the Navigators while studying in Canada. On his return he started a small computer training and servicing shop which expanded into the Canada Institute of Computer Science in Petaling Jaya. By 2003 this had become a university and is now part of the diversified University College Sedaya Institute Group (Ng, 2013).

Six of the twelve were Christians already and then went on to further success in business. Tiong belonged to the mostly Methodist community of Fuzhou in Sarawak. Coming as colonists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century to help open Sarawak these Fuzhous gained a pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit. They were engaged in early agriculture including rubber and later into trade (Tiong, 2012). Tong, Michael Yam, Ting, Tiah, and Lee were Christians when young or came from Christian homes. But they went through a spiritual rediscovery.

These 12 Christian businessmen play active roles in the Christian community. They appear as key speakers in Christian conferences and in interviews with local and international media. In recent years, they were associated with conferences and workshops organized by national Christian or Christian business groups for the wider business community. These include the National Evangelical Christian Federation (NECF), the FGBMF, and the Eagles Leadership Institute. Tony Tiah through his companies and Christian ministries also organizes regular marketplace workshops. During these conferences Chinese Christian businessmen speak about their conversion as well as their Christian role in the secular, corporate world. More than motivational forums, these provide Christian businessmen with a platform to express their religious convictions (Johnson, 2003).

On 25 March 2009, as a case in point, the NECF organized a seminar with the theme of "Christians and the Stock Market" with Tony Tiah as one of the key speakers. The publicity brochure described him as coming:

with a wealth of business experiences and an ability to align the spiritual truths with the practical realities of life. Having a keen sense of the business challenges faced by Christians in the marketplace, he has a passion to share the lessons he had learnt from applying God's principles to the business in a secular world so that Christian businessmen can experience the blessings of God (NECF, 2009).

In September 2011, the Damansara Utama Methodist Church organized a "Marketplace Conference: Christian Leadership in Business and Government". The speakers included Francis Yeoh and Michael Yam Kong Choy. Involved was also Paul Low and Idris Jala, a Cabinet Minister. Paul Low is a Christian involved in Transparency International while Idris Jala is a Kelabit Christian from Sarawak. These Christian businessmen as leaders in the secular corporate world have major roles in the Christian community. Their presence and their financial contribution to the churches they attend have considerable impact.

Publicity is not always sought by these Christian businessmen. Lee Oi Hian is a quiet provider of funds to mission schools and Christian events. He contributes to the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (Oxford, 2014). Likewise, George Ting funds Christian activities as well as a Christian research centre. Others also provide funding for Christian social and evangelical events. But these contributions are not publicized.

Just as important, these Christian businessmen are also prominent in national life. Michael Yam Kong Choy is President of the Real Estate and Housing Developers Association Malaysia. Francis Yeoh is reportedly close to the former Prime Ministers Dr. Mahathir Mohamed and Dato Seri Abdullah Badawi. Tan Koon Swan was once the President of the Malaysian Chinese Association, a component party of the ruling coalition. Tiong is influential within the Chinese community especially in various guilds and associations as well as in regional Chinese media. Tong Kooi Ong was reportedly close to Anwar Ibrahim when the latter was Deputy Prime Minister between 1994 and 1998. Lee Oi Hian was chairman of the Malaysian Palm Oil Promotion Council and a member of the Malaysian Palm Oil Board and Malaysian Cocoa Board (Hanim, 2012).

### **The Christian Community in Malaysia**

According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, 9.1 per cent of Malaysia's population of 27.5 million, or about 2 million, are Christians. Census data also show that since 1980 the number of people going to church had grown by an average of 12.5 per cent in the preceding 10 years. More churches have since been set up (Lee, 2007). Approximately half of the Christian population is Roman Catholic, but the fastest growth is among the Protestant groups especially the independent churches.

It is within the Protestant groups that these Christian businessmen have emerged. The impetus appears to have come from the so-called Prosperity Gospel which teaches that "believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and 'the sowing of seeds' through faithful payments of tithes and offerings" (Lausanne, 2009). It places emphasis on a faith that is expected to yield both spiritual and material blessings. The adherents are found in independent churches but also in Sidang Injil Borneo and some Methodist churches. Such churches have experienced phenomenal growth and may be described as megachurches with a regular worship attendance averaging between two to four thousand. Churches where some of these Christian businessmen are associated with include the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC), the Calvary Church, and the Full Gospel Assembly (FGA).

Another entry point for Chinese businessmen into the Christian community has been non-sectarian organizations for Christian professionals. The Graduate Christian Fellowship (GCF) founded in 1969 is a non-exclusive organization for Christian university graduates and professionals. Over the years since its formation GCF has created affiliate fellowships related

to different professions (Roxborough, 1992). Each of these serves to provide networking and relating religious activity to business practice.

Enabling the greater public involvement of Christians were the formation of the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) and the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF). The CCM represents the main-line churches such as the Methodist and Presbyterian while the NECF formed in May 1983 is an umbrella organization for evangelical churches. These two together with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia formed the Christian Federation of Malaysia in 1985. The NECF and to a lesser extent the CCM organize conferences and workshops addressing challenges of politics and economics to their constituencies, and are thus relevant to the business community in more ways than traditional ecclesial organizations.

The church, as well as various para-church organizations, offers to Chinese Christians a set of institutions that are parallels to traditional Chinese associations or chambers of commerce. The Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship (FGBMF) in Malaysia was started in 1978 by a group of professionals and businessmen. The group linked up with the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship International and the Kuala Lumpur chapter was formed, initially comprised largely of fellow professionals (Lum, 2012). In 1985, chapters in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Melaka, Ipoh, Seremban and Kuala Terengganu gathered to form a national body. Today, the FGBMF claims to have more than 100 chapters nationwide with about 50 in the Klang Valley. One leader estimates that average attendance of meetings is about two thousand (Lum, 2014). The majority is English and Chinese-speaking but there are two Tamil-speaking and one using Bahasa Malaysia. Over the years, the ministry has expanded to include family members, foreign workers and students.

There is also a smaller movement called the Businessmen and Professional Ministry (B&PM) formed in 1994 "out of a desire to help businessmen and professionals integrate their faith with their work world" (bnpministries, 2012). This was started by David Wong, the CEO of Tupperware Malaysia and Asia-Pacific, who holds Bible discussions in his office (Lum, 2013). B&PM seeks to help its members "make business decisions based on Biblical ethics and principles, bring God's presence into their workplace and reach out to and disciple their pre-believing colleagues and business associates" (bnpministries, 2012). The activities of these groups create opportunities for business links among their members.

There is an international dimension to these Christian business groups. The international links facilitate Chinese Christian business networking directly and indirectly within the context of globalizing Chinese business, the rise of China as an economic power, and increasingly active international Christian movements. They represent efforts of Chinese Christian businesses to link across national boundaries for business advantage. These are taking place when there are also meetings of other non-religious fraternities such as the World Chinese Entrepreneurs, the World Hakka Conference, and the International Teochew Convention.

The Christian feature of international solidarity can be seen in regional conferences. Two Christian businessmen prominent in overseas networking are Stephen Riady of the huge Lippo

conglomerate in Indonesia and Khoo Kay Peng of Malaysia. Riady has investments in Singapore and all over the world. Khoo Kay Peng, who has taken his business overseas such as buying Laura Ashley in Britain and partnering Hong Kong's Robert Kuok, has developed links with overseas Christian groups especially in the United States of America. He also contributed financially to building the World Prayer Centre at the Assembly of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, Missouri. In 1991, his MUI Industries came to the rescue of Morris Cerullo's Worldwide Evangelism (Cerullo, 2012) in the purchase of Jim Bakker's Heritage Resort.

Contact has also been established with a group of Christian businessmen from China called the Cypress Leadership Institute. This institute in Beijing has organized several meetings bringing Christian businessmen from China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia together. In October 2011, the Institute brought some 50 businessmen from China to Kuala Lumpur and meetings were held with local Christians including some politicians (*City News*, 2011).

The international dimension in Southeast Asian Christian networks is significant. While their values resonate with traditional Chinese and other religious concerns for material blessing through spiritual power, articulation of the basic teachings of the Prosperity Gospel is drawn from pastors in the United States, Latin America, and the United Kingdom. Moreover, American evangelicals themselves have sought international connections with businessmen sympathetic to their agenda and are keen to develop an international market for their religious products.

There may also be a political undercurrent to this international Christian link. Many Chinese businessmen believe that Christian rather than overtly Chinese networking as arousing less hostility from surrounding communities. This is particularly so in the Southeast Asian region where Chinese identity has attracted hostile attention. In this it is not always easy to unpack religious, economic, political and ethnic rivalries but Chinese Christian businessmen can be seen as rebalancing their identity in situations where they are successful but not necessarily secure. The NEP response to the ethnic riots in Malaysia and the 1998 anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia are instances of such indigenous reaction to Chinese economic prominence (Lim and Gosling, 1997; Reid, 1997). No doubt eventually Christian connections and an international Christian identity can also be problematic but for the moment it may seem to be less so.

### **The State and the Chinese Christian Businessmen**

The emergence of Christian business groups, the rise of the charismatic, mega churches and the establishing of para-church organizations corresponded roughly with the period in which Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP) and Islamization program began to have a major impact on the business environment for non-Malay communities.

The NEP was introduced in 1970 to redress the economic imbalance among the races. The declared aim was to eradicate poverty irrespective of race and to promote *Bumiputera* (mainly

Malays) corporate participation so that by 1990, Bumiputera would achieve thirty per cent of corporate ownership. The NEP set quotas to ensure that adequate Bumiputera representation would be reflected in education, employment and in ownership of corporate equity.

At this juncture, an Islamic resurgence also reached Malaysia. In 1973, world oil prices shot up and not only strengthened the financial position of oil-producing countries but gave oil-producing Muslim countries a more influential voice in international politics. The resurgence was boosted in 1979 following a second oil spike and the Islamic revolution in Iran. The Iranian revolution inspired Muslims world-wide to pursue the goals of establishing states based on the Islamic revolution and Islamic laws (Gomez, 2007; Camroux, 1996; Muzaffar, 1987).

Among Muslims in Malaysia there was stricter observance of religious practices. An assertive Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (Islamic Youth Movement Malaysia) was formed. New Islamic institutions were created including vehicles for Islamic banking and insurance which were in direct competition with Chinese interests. In 1981, a program to instil Islamic values in government was introduced (Liew, 2007). In short, the state intervened directly in the economy to create new corporate groups and sectors to re-balance ethnic participation.

Among the first non-Malays to be affected by the implementation of the NEP were the English-educated, many of whom were Christians. By the later part of the NEP period, state policies hit the wider Chinese community irrespective of the stream of education they went through. The government shifted attention to the restructuring of the economy and corporations, and those seeking listing in the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, were required to reserve thirty per cent of their capital for Bumiputera equity. Government contracts for various projects favored Bumiputera contractors (Jomo, 1997).

One initial response of Chinese business groups was to mobilize their resources by forming cooperatives. However the largest of these, Multi-purpose Holdings, together with over 20 other cooperatives linked to Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) leaders, collapsed in the 1980s owing to a regional economic recession and this discredited both the MCA (a member of the ruling coalition) and traditional Chinese business leadership. It might even have led to a loss of confidence among many Chinese about using Chinese identity or solidarity in responding to expanding state initiatives (Gale, 1985).

It is not coincidental that around the beginning of the 1980s a group of Christian professionals and businessmen became visible. Of these Khoo Kay Peng of MUI Corporation was most prominent. As other Chinese business interests declined, the shares of his listed companies moved up strongly in the KL stock exchange. Public interest in Khoo increased, including because of his association with Tengku Razaleigh, the then Finance Minister, and his public declaration of being a Christian and his testimony about how his life had been both spiritually and materially blessed.

Soon other prominent Chinese businessmen were converting or made public their Christian beliefs. Their public testimony included accounts of how they or family members had been



miraculously healed of serious sickness. Others with business problems insisted that prayer had helped them overcome these. Others who went through political crisis and business disaster were convinced that there had been divine intervention to bring about the restoration of their personal life and business fortune (Dahles, 2007).

Of course these tropes are not alien to traditional Chinese religion. Traditionally, Chinese went to temples to pray for healing from sickness and also for business success. The Christian teaching of blessings including the prosperity gospel is not entirely alien to Chinese people brought up with such traditional beliefs (Machado, 2010). It was also common in traditional Chinese religion to shift one's allegiance to a particular cult or deity according to its efficacy. Christianity associated with business success was not a departure from traditional values and it was becoming a religion embraced by respectable, well-educated professionals. Francis Yeoh testimony of how his visit to a church had led to his family overcome a business crisis is a favourite within Christian circles (Yeoh, 2010).

For other businessmen, the call to repentance and restoration had other appeals. Businessmen who had suffered business setbacks usually encountered loss of standing in the wider Chinese community. In Christian groups they now found acceptance. The story of Tan Koon Swan stands out. He was head of the Multi-Purpose Holdings and several companies as well as president of the MCA. Following the collapse of his companies in 1986 and his subsequent imprisonment in Singapore and Malaysia for corporate fraud, he embraced Christianity.

Yet it has not all been easy for these converts. Both within the Christian and non-Christian communities, there is often skepticism about the authenticity of their Christian faith. Their past is not easily forgotten and their continuing business practices are subject to scrutiny. Christian groups that have embraced these businessmen are mostly sympathetic, however. They acknowledge that some of these Christian businessmen are still "work-in-progress" in terms of Christian growth and maturity.

Embracing or rededicating themselves to the Christian faith has given these businessmen more than just acceptance in a new community. As high profile businessmen who have become Christians, they also regain lost status. They are sought for public speaking engagements. In these meetings, they present testimonies of conversion or offer motivation talks on business and spiritual success. In turn, they enhance the visibility of churches they join. It is claimed that such churches associated with prominent Christian businessmen have attracted new members. The financial contributions of Christian businessmen in no small measure has contributed to the growth of these churches.

### **Chinese Christians and the Broader Chinese Community**

How distinctive are Chinese Christians from other Chinese businessmen? For one, they come from a generation, which, though many of them speak Chinese, feels more comfortable

in English speaking environments. Most have studied in English language schools (See Table 1). Many have also studied overseas such as Ong Kooi Tong. They are less likely therefore, when compared to other Chinese merchants, to identify themselves with Chinese education and are also less comfortable in traditional Chinese guilds and associations where Mandarin or a Chinese dialect is the language of communication and traditional Chinese religious practices are observed. Tiong may be an exception as he is also fluent in Mandarin.

It is also noted that most of the 12 businessmen started in the 'traditional' sectors of Malaysian Chinese business such as trade, mining, plantations and manufacturing (Heng and Sieh, 2000). However while a few have continued in them others have diversified into new sectors. Tiong is involved in the timber trade. Lee Oi Hian took charge of the family's huge KL-Kepong plantation business. Others such as Tong and Michael Yam are in property development as is Francis Yeoh whose family started in construction and property.

However, Tony Tiah, a science graduate from the University of Malaya before he acquired an MBA, made his money from stock broking. His company developed into one of the largest in Malaysia. Subsequently he went into housing development (Lum, 2014). Tan Koon Swan began by helping in the development of the Genting resort and casino, but he really made his mark in the Chinese corporatization movement and the trading of shares in stock markets in Malaysia and Singapore - activities for which he was subsequently charged with criminal breach of trust and was jailed.

Francis Yeoh, though coming from a traditional construction business of his father, came into great wealth through the operation of an independent power plant approved by then Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammed. The concession was granted with very favourable conditions because Mahathir wanted competition for the national electricity board, Tenaga Nasional. Yeoh went on to other big ventures, including the acquisition of Wessex, a British water plant and the development of an entire island, Pangkor Laut, into a luxury resort.

Tong Kooi Ong became wealthy when he took over the ailing Cooperative Bank and transformed it into the innovative and profit-making Phileo Allied Bank. Following the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 the bank was taken over by government-backed agencies. Tong then focused on developing his media ventures (Bloomberg, 2013). George Ting made his mark by his astute management of the Kentucky Fried Chicken chain and expanding to other food chains. Peter Ng started and is running a large and successful private university. Finally, Khoo Kay Peng who started out by establishing a bank diversified through the acquisition of other companies.

These Chinese Christian businessmen demonstrated their competency in relatively new sectors of business such as finance, hospitality services, education, and modern trading. Tiong and Francis Yeoh control and run huge, modern conglomerates. Tiong controls Rimbunan Hijau which has interests in timber and newspaper publications, both local and overseas. Francis Yeoh manages YTL Corporation which has interests in power and water management, property development, and even the railway business such as the KLIA express train. YTL also



has plans for a high-speed train from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore. Lee Oi Hian has diversified by taking over a United Kingdom retailing chain of fashion products.

This mixture of traditional and non-traditional businesses suggests that these Christian businessmen are in the evolving forefront of new business opportunities. The continuing affirmative NEP program have made it difficult for the Chinese to maintain their position in traditional sectors. Tin mining has ended because ores have been depleted and rubber plantations have been taken over by state-owned companies. Sectors such as oil, banking, energy, and telecommunications are state-regulated. Thus, these Christians like other Chinese businessmen have been forced to find opportunities in new sectors. In such circumstances, Christian businessmen with a Western educational background and a network of regional and international Christian business colleagues represent a variant response to a business landscape that increasingly encounters strong state intervention.

Even as Chinese Christian businessmen seek international connections they are less active or involved in the traditional Chinese guilds and associations including the Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Moreover, few of the Christian businessmen are prominent in political parties that expressly represent their ethnic group's interest. These parties have become so politically weakened that they are no longer effective in representing their economic concerns. In fact such affiliation can be a liability since powerful Malays prefer to collaborate with politically neutral Chinese businessmen.

Finally, many of the Chinese Christian businessmen see their business efforts as in line with their religious obligation. They regard their success as a blessing from God and that their business should help extend the gospel message (Krueger, 1990). For them and those who attend their religious meetings, the message is that performance of religious duties is a correlation to business success. Resources and facilities from business success should be used to further the kingdom of God on earth. It is with much evangelical fervour that they address this in public forums and church meetings. Thus, the YTL Group of Francis Yeoh gives out annually donations or love gifts to various churches and church organizations (Lim, 2011).

### **“New” and Traditional**

Although Chinese Christian businessmen have embraced a new faith, certain traits associated with the larger Chinese business community persist. First, Chinese Christian businessmen as with compatriots of other faiths extoll values such as hard work, thrift, and savings (Hamilton, 1996). The institution of the family remains central in the business enterprises of a number of Christian businessmen of which Tiong of Rimbunan Hijau and Francis Yeoh from the YTL Corporation are examples. George Ting's management of his business also relies on family members (Terril and Erisman, 2004). In this respect they are all akin to Robert Kuok who also placed members of his family and extended family at senior management positions.

Secondly, these Chinese Christian businessmen hold leadership positions within their faith community. In Malaysia, freed from the influence of the scholar Mandarins, the Chinese merchant class became the social elite in the community. Through wealth and philanthropy, Chinese businessmen were elected to positions in school boards, traditional associations and chambers of commerce. At the same time the state especially during the colonial period, valued their enterprise in developing the economy, and confirmed their leadership role in society by appointing them to state councils and other representative bodies (Wang, 1992). Such positions were denied to businessmen in traditional Chinese society where merchants as a social group occupied the lowest standing, below that of the scholar mandarins, peasants and artisans.

Likewise, Christian businessmen enjoy leadership status in churches, para-church organizations and Christian business groups. Through participation in Christian business conferences, church ministries, and financial tithing and contribution they attain high profile within the Christian community. Identified with several large and growing churches such as the SIB, Petaling Jaya Evangelical Free Church, Full Gospel Church, and Calvary Church in the Klang Valley, Christian businessmen are credited for drawing in new members. They are accepted in high positions because of their wealth, which in the interpretation of congregation members, is evidence of spiritual blessing. They are also looked upon by others as a connection to business networking. And so like other Chinese businessmen, the Christian counterparts aspire to or gained leadership in the church community.

Third, Christian businessmen in their response to the state are no different from that of other Chinese businessmen. Wang Gungwu argued that Chinese merchants had in the past, particularly in imperial China, to deal with a state that was exploitative (Wang, 1991). How to deal with the state continues to be a challenge for Chinese business in Malaysia. In taking on Malay partners and surrendering thirty per cent of equity, and building links with powerful Malay political figures, Christian businessmen behave in ways similar to that of other Chinese businessmen when coping with the demands of the state.

Over the years, many Chinese Christian businessmen recognize the necessity of cultivating business links with UMNO and particular Malay political figures. Among the Chinese Christians who made it to recent *Forbes* lists are those who have business or political connection with senior Malays. Khoo Kay Peng was close to Tengku Razaleigh when the latter was Finance Minister and so was Tong Kooi Ong who was associated with Anwar Ibrahim then Finance Minister and Prime Minister. Francis Yeoh has Mirzan Mahathir, the son of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed in his board of directors. The others also have Malays as partners or in their boards of directors.

Finally, Christian businessmen partner not only with fellow believers but also non-Christian businessmen (Redding, 1996). Khoo Kay Peng had joint ventures with Robert Kuok, a man who credits his success to Confucianist values. Tiong in expanding his media empire in Malaysia and in the region deals with mostly non-Christian groups while Tong Kooi Ong once joined Vincent Tan, a non-Christian, in creating Nexnews Communications. Given

the considerable business inter-dependence, Christian businessmen find it necessary to work within the wider Chinese business community.

### Conclusion

In Malaysia, religion is a potent force both as a political expression and in business. This study suggests that the intersection of religion, state and business has led to the emergence of a Christian business community in the 1980s with a Christian identity that has gained growing visibility and influence. Christianity is a factor in the business of this community but not in the sense that Christian values were what made these men rich since many of these businessmen were already successful before becoming Christian. Rather, it is the opportunities that adherence to Christianity offers for useful affiliations, the gaining of prestige, fresh relations with political elites, and restoration of lost status that account for its appeal. These are factors that are primarily non-spiritual.

At the same time, to these businessmen, functioning in a difficult political and even uncertain business environment and with rising Islamization, Christianity offers some spiritual solace (Yeoh, 2011). To these businessmen Christianity, particularly the prosperity gospel, explains or justifies why they are successful or can be successful, and that further blessings are promised in a challenging NEP environment. To them Christianity affirms their predestined election and of wealth gained. Further, Christian businessmen's associations also provide a sense of solidarity and identity. It has to be said, however, that these Christian businessmen also display values and features common among the wider Chinese business community notably thrift, hard work and family-centeredness which are associated with Confucianist values (Chu, 2001). And as with other Chinese businessmen they aspire to leadership in society. While adopting different cultural or religion forms, their response to state and business in Malaysia are similar. Beneath the Christian faith, whether traditionally evangelical or of Prosperity Gospel, is an underlying layer of values that exists among entrepreneurial groups all over the world but has been described as Chinese, strongly influenced by Confucianism.

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